

**Statement of U.S. Representative Edward J. Markey (D-MA)
NBC's Decision to Begin Airing Hard Liquor Advertisements
December 20, 2001**

During my parents' generation, the hard liquor industry and the television broadcasters agreed, voluntarily, that advertising hard liquor on TV was wrong because of the likelihood of kids being in the audience. They were concerned about the effect on kids in this country.

They were right to be concerned and smart to refrain from such hard liquor ads because the public health consequences of alcohol consumption are staggering. Alcohol is a leading cause of many public health ailments for millions of Americans including cirrhosis of the liver, central and peripheral nervous systems damage, damage to unborn children including birth defects, mental retardation, and fetal alcohol syndrome. Moreover, Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) has noted that alcohol is the Number 1 drug problem for America's young people and is a key factor in the three leading causes of death for youth: automobile crashes, homicide, and suicide.

Concern about these negative consequences of hard liquor alcohol consumption led industry leaders over a generation ago to refrain from advertising such products because it was improper to encourage youthful television viewers to consume hard liquor.

The decades-long self-imposed restraint is ending and I believe that it represents poor public policy. NBC is one of America's premier platforms for advertisers to main line messages into our homes. When NBC says "yes" to liquor ads, it becomes much much harder to just say "no" to alcohol abuse. I implore NBC to reconsider its actions.

We all realize that NBC will not be the first media outlet to air liquor ads, just the first national broadcast network. Yet networks are the arteries of broadcasting. In essence, they deliver wholesale, not retail, to every corner of America. Sure, a cable channel or an occasional affiliate may already be running liquor ads, but that's like having a little dampness in basement -- I don't like it, but its not a flood. But when the main line breaks, I've got a deluge on my hands. Television broadcasters are especially favored by the government in many areas of policy because they deliver to the American people free, universally-available television programming. Broadcasters received free airwave frequencies and they get free carriage on cable systems for their stations. The other side of the public policy coin is that television broadcasters discharge special obligations because of their valuable trusteeship of the public's airwaves.

I believe that it is contrary to the public interest responsibilities that broadcasters must discharge for NBC to display hard liquor advertisements on shows or sporting events that inevitably will reach audiences composed of millions of kids, such as during the Olympics.

We should not compound public health risks, but seek to make progress. Per capita consumption of wine and beer in this country was relatively stable over the period beginning in the early 1980s and continuing into the 1990s, when overall alcohol consumption was falling. Most of the decrease in U.S. alcohol consumption can be attributed to decreased consumption of hard liquor, which went down by almost 35 percent according to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. Why on Earth would we want to reverse this trend by trumpeting advertisements for spirits on national broadcast networks?

Policymakers should endeavor to obtain the equivalent self-restraint on the part of the hard liquor companies and television broadcasters today that our parent's generation found in the corporate

executives of their era, who for no amount of additional revenue, found it simply inappropriate to pitch hard liquor to children. I think most parents today would still agree that pitching hard liquor when under-aged children are in the audience is shameful.

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